

TANK McNAMARA

by Jeff Millar & Bill Hinds



Sambito looking to future

United Press International
COCOA, Fla. — Bill Virdon is no stranger in the outfield. He played it more than 15 years, though his biggest trouble was that he was a center fielder in the New York Yankees' chain right around the time a kid named Mickey Mantle was playing it for them.

Once in a while, the Houston Astros' manager who did such a magnificent job last year getting them so close to the World Series, likes to walk out to the outfield before a ball game and talk with some of his players while they're shagging flies.

He did that one day this spring with his left-handed relief ace, Joe Sambito, who had agreed to a nice new five-year seven-figure contract a short time before.

Bill Virdon had something on his mind. Typically, he used the soft key approach although he didn't beat around the bush.

"You're in a good position financially," he said to Sambito.

"You don't have to worry about having a blockbuster year or about piling up big numbers. I think you're a very good pitcher with the stuff you have. I also think now is the time to start thinking about five years from now. You're not gonna have that good hard fast ball all the time. You have to learn to develop your off speed pitch. I want you to work on it. Don't be afraid to take your lumps now and then."

And that's what Joe Sambito is doing this spring. Working on his

change-up, and if he gets it down pat, look out. Virdon wants him to have another pitch. Especially to those right-handed hitters so they won't be able to sit on his fast ball.

Sambito never has had any arm trouble and is always ready to pitch. He is durable, dependable and consistent. He never has gotten that much publicity, but for sheer ability supported by hard, cold statistics, there aren't too many more effective pitchers in the game.

Would you believe Sambito's lifetime earned run average of 2.50 is better than those of either Steve Carlton or Tom Seaver, a couple of three-time Cy Young Award winners? It is. Or that it's lower than that of Sandy Koufax, who wound up his career at 2.76? Only one pitcher now in the majors among those with at least 20 decisions owns a better lifetime ERA than the Astros' classy 28-year-old southpaw and that's Bruce Sutter with his 2.40.

Sambito helped the Astros plenty last year with his 17 saves, 2.20 ERA and 8-4 record. Maybe you remember how he helped them to the western division title and in their five-game playoff with the Phillies.

Virdon brought him in to pitch to one batter, Bake McBride, in Game 2 of the playoffs and Sambito struck him out with the bases full. He also fanned Mike Schmidt in a clutch situation in the fifth and final contest but in between those two appearances, he worked two

innings in Game 4 and wound up the loser after Greg Luzinski doubled home two runs off him.

The playoff between the Astros and Phillies easily was one of the most dramatic in history providing a different thrill every two minutes.

Looking back at those playoffs now, Sambito concedes the defeat by the Phillies was hard to take but it was not really the low point of his five years with the Astros.

"The most disappointing loss I ever had personally, the one that stands out most, was a game in St. Louis in 1979," he says. "We had a three-run lead with two out and I had a full count on Roger Freed with the bases full. I came in with a high fast ball. Home run. Goodbye."

Heeding the advice of Virdon and pitching coach Mel Wright, Sambito is experimenting with his change-up whenever he can find the right situation. He also plans to use it occasionally once the season starts but in a jam, he figures to go with his fast ball.

"I'd hate to have to cost the team one game," he says. "We saw what it meant last season."

Indiana expected to be back

United Press International
PHILADELPHIA — Next year's finals of the NCAA Basketball Championships are not in Philadelphia, but that doesn't mean Indiana won't be heavily involved in the chase for another national title.

The Hoosiers won their fourth NCAA crown Monday night at the Spectrum with a 63-50 victory over North Carolina. It was their first title since 1976, when they also captured the big prize on the same court.

"My first thought would be, really, when does the tournament committee want to come back to Philadelphia?" asked Indiana Coach Bobby Knight.

Monday night's contest nearly was postponed because of the assassination attempt on President Reagan, but NCAA officials, after much consultation, decided to hold the contest when Reagan's condition improved.

The 1982 Final Four will meet at the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans, and many expect Indiana to be right in the thick of things.

The Hoosiers return four starters from the 26-9 championship team. That includes All-America guard Isiah Thomas, named MVP of the tournament after scoring 23 points in the finals, although NBA scouts would like to see the 6-foot-1 sophomore turn pro.

The other returning starters are 6-6 guard Randy Wittman, who bombed away from the outside against North Carolina for 16 points, 6-10 centerforward Landon Turner and 6-8 forward Ted Kitchel. Another player to figure prominently in Indiana's plans is 6-3 reserve guard Jim Thomas,

who made the All-Tournament team with his hustling all-around play.

What may send shudders throughout the Big Ten is Knight's opinion that the best days of the current Hoosier team might be ahead.

"We've undergone a maturation process through the course of the year and through that have developed more experience," said Knight, whose team was 7-5 in December before turning its season around. "This team has grown, and developed. But I think they haven't finished maturing yet. That should come some time next year."

The only starter the Hoosiers will lose is 6-9 center Ray Tolbert, who is Knight's choice for the Big Ten's Most Valuable Player. Tolbert scored just five points but pulled down a gamehigh 11 rebounds against the Tar Heels.

Indiana's five-game march through the NCAA tournament was devastating. Its smallest margin of victory was 13 points and the aggregate point spread over five contests was a whopping 113 points, or nearly 23 a game.

As for North Carolina, which finished 29-8, Coach Dean Smith says farewell to two starters — Al

Wood, the silky 6-6 forward who scored 57 points in the last two games, and guard Mike Pepper.

But the Atlantic Coast Conference team does return formidable inside strength in 6-9 sophomore James Worthy and 6-9 freshman Sam Perkins, plus dependable point guard Jimmy Black.

If the Tar Heels are fortunate enough to advance some distance in the NCAA tournament, however, Smith figures he'll see a familiar face.

"Bobby does such a great job with Indiana," he said.

Rodeo time is Miller Time



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